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DRAMATICS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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Dramatics is the laboratory of self-analysis and self-development. By dramatics I mean a high-school course devoted to the special study of the theater and of the drama.

The course¹ advocated here is intended (1) to aid in the development of personality; (2) to establish standards of criticism of drama and of the theater; (3) to present a brief outline of the history of the theater and of the function of the theater during the great periods of its history; and (4) to promote attendance at good plays. In order to emphasize these aims, may I state that there is no vocational aim; that is, the course is not intended to aid in the manufacture of actors and actresses!

First in importance among these aims must be placed the development of personality. Personality is the sum total of character plus individual mannerisms. It involves the individual's threefold activity—mental, moral, and physical. When I suggest that dramatics will aid the student in the development of personality I mean particularly that through the study of characterization, through the method of literary analysis plus the dynamic portrayal of character, a student will discover that certain habits of living and thinking produce certain pleasant or unpleasant effects in personality which make it either easier and pleasanter or harder and more unpleasant for a man to get along with his fellows. Moreover, there results a quickened perception in reading the character of those with whom he is associated—as well as a quickened desire to correct in himself traits of unpleasant effect. The lad who studies the motives and habits of Macbeth, or the girl who analyzes a Mrs. Malaprop or a Rosalind, with the aim of interpreting by physical suggestion the motives and habits of these characters, discovers some valuable secrets in regard to the unconscious physical revelations of his own personality. In dramatiza-

¹ See p. 323.

tions in the English course we often supply the analysis of character, yet we do not afford sufficient definite impersonation, or dynamic portrayal. There is not time. By such investigation of the habits of thinking and living the correction of unfortunate personal mannerisms is fostered, and the development of a greater generosity of spirit, a richer sense of humor, and an increased appreciation of real values in character is promoted. By the attempt, too, to impersonate characters in drama, the imagination of the student becomes so active that mental and physical response is stimulated, with the tendency toward *being* not *acting*.

Through all the process of analysis and impersonation the student cultivates freedom of expression in voice and action—a more vivid, well-calculated emotional control. The student cultivates not only emotional *exposition*, but emotional *intensity*; and the two combined constitute a great force of personal brilliancy and poise, or reserve power.

I shall defer till later the discussion of the remaining three aims, because I feel that they will become evident through the discussion of the content of the course.

Much has been written on the matter of a course in dramatics. Most writers, it would seem, have included phases of the subject about as follows—the study of voice work, pantomime, stage management, vocal music, physiology, make-up, social deportment, and dramatic literature. To be sure, those elements enumerated are not to be neglected, but the content is not complete, nor is it arranged with particular application to suitability for adoption in the high school.

The phases of a course in high school, it seems to me, should be four: (1) the historical, which summarizes the development of drama and of the theater; (2) the literary, which involves the study of dramas and dramatists; (3) the artistic, which involves the study of methods of great actors, great producers, and great artist managers; and (4) the mechanical, which includes the study of stage equipment and of the details involved in production.

When we have recognized the content of the course, let us consider the means of organization through which we can present the matter.

In the first place, in the suggested outline I have arranged for (1) a series of subjects about which to center discussions and readings; and (2) laboratory periods to be spent on the intensive study of voice work, action problems, mechanics of production, and rehearsals of plays. I have supplied (3) lists of references on the various phases of the content in dramatics to substantiate for the student discussion and laboratory problems; I have made provision for (4) notebook, scrapbook, and bulletin-board work.

The class discussions of the suggested lecture topics listed under IV A in the outline are intended merely to present in brief to all the students definite, fundamental information on the essential phases of the work. In the laboratory sections (IV B) it is possible, I believe, to construct miniature models of stages in order to illustrate ideal methods in staging of plays. In many schools it is not possible because of the lack of equipment to stage plays as we would like, yet we can, with the use of models, show how the plays might be staged had we the required equipment. Students enjoy building these models, experimenting with settings, lights, etc.; they read with enthusiasm all the technical details that Moderwell furnishes in his book, *The Modern Theatre*; they wade through learned discussions by Thorndike on the Shaksperian stage; they devour the criticism of Brander Matthews, Clayton Hamilton, W. P. Eaton, etc.; they dig up comments on the skill of our greatest actors, producers, playwrights; and they beg, borrow, and steal pictures and articles for their scrapbooks on the various phases of the work. This work affords training in standards of criticism. The suggested list of readings enables the student to continue to gain information on the particular phases of the work which are of most interest to him. Next, the notebook, scrapbook, and bulletin-board opportunities are obvious to any teacher in any high-school course. I shall not stop for further suggestion about them.

Now I come to the hardest part of the discussion—the problems which confront those who attempt to give such a course in the average high school.

Dramatics is an art. The same pitfalls which await the amateur artist whose medium is painting or sculpture or music or dancing

await the student in dramatic art—and the greatest of these is imitation. There is a psychology of teaching our subject. When one is so directly shaping character—personality—of persons who are in their adolescence, passing through emotional upheavals, the greatest care must be taken not to emphasize the wrong elements of the art, not to attain “effects” at the expense of development of the thought and the feeling which substantiate the qualities required in impersonation.

Those to whom the instruction of high-school amateurs is confided find the difficulty of getting results without imitative teaching one of the gravest problems to be confronted. It is only after patient experimenting with many devices that the average trained instructor in the subject frees himself from the tendency toward imitative teaching. The average student is afraid to try an original piece of action, and the teacher, goaded to desperation, “shows” him some gesture, pose, or some voice mannerism, perhaps. He snaps it up and then recedes into a state of mental relaxation until the teacher, again conscious of his passivity, shows him some additional device. When the desired effect has been produced with great faithfulness of imitation, the instructor often seizes upon the consoling fact that at any rate the pupil shows “ease”—and in a relative degree no “stiffness” or “awkwardness.” But the child has been robbed of the chance to develop initiative and originality, and if this process of training were continued he would experience little development in personality. Artificial stimulants have a strange lack of permanency of effect. The use of them readily becomes a habit. It were better, to my mind, to produce a play with less of the so-called “finish” that may be attained by imitative instruction and to have given every member of the cast his due in the way of personal development! It is more fundamental to promote the gradual development of a natural grace of movement, a sincerely emotional beauty of tone, and an original interpretation of character, than to have taught a few voice tricks or a clever gesture that may delight an untrained audience. I would not cast a student in a part because he could do it, but in order that he might have an opportunity to develop. Such training, moreover, does not presuppose that the course is

conducted for geniuses. This education *may* discover special talent, but it will raise the general standard of development in personality; it will tend to improve voice, to establish vigor and grace of movement, to promote poise, and to foster intelligent criticism of acting. The unskilled teacher often seizes upon, and frequently exploits, the student of native ability; but the skilled instructor will attempt to develop those whose personal power is latent, because as a problem, when one has acquaintance with methods, progress in work with such students is vastly interesting, and results are deeply satisfying.

The second great problem of the instructor is how to teach standards of criticism. In the first place, in order to establish standards and to encourage the attendance at good plays, one must have *seen* good plays *acted*, and one must have the means of providing that students attend good plays. How is such a thing possible? In most schools the only way by which a teacher can secure attendance of students at the best plays is to provide for such attendance at class expense. Yet in the average school, the money earned by the dramatics class is requisitioned to pay the athletic team's debt, or to provide a new drinking fountain for the lower hall, or to defray the expense of redecorating the restroom, or any other equally foreign necessity! The fight for the right to use our own fund for stage equipment, for books which deal with our own subject, for material from which to construct our miniature model stages, so that we can carry out our own experiments, and for theater tickets for the best plays so that we can teach analysis, identification, and criticism of methods of production and acting—this fight is always with us! Of course in the smaller towns which are remote from theatrical centers the problem of attendance is difficult of solution. Emphasis on criticism is not practical there. Yet in order to teach standards of criticism of acting, of the material of the theater, of the methods and appeal of the theater, it is highly imperative that the student see drama acted—the best of its kind in every respect. One does not attempt to teach the laws of physics or chemistry without demonstrating the application of the laws; nor in mathematics or language does one instruct without practical demonstration; so also in our field, “seeing is

believing," and the twofold sense test of eye and ear gives the student a quickened appreciation of the critical analysis of the drama about which he has read or conversed. How to use movies for teaching criticism of some of the principles of acting? It is true that one cannot say much of the methods of production, though Vachel Lindsay has a good little book on the *Art of the Motion Picture* which may be used as a guide. In many towns in which good plays are produced the students are not able to see the plays. The fight for the use of funds is worth while; it should *in such cases* be won!

The last problem which I shall even attempt to discuss is the problem of what plays shall be included for reading and what for acting.

It is not too much, surely, to insist that every play *read* or *produced* shall be of *standard* literary value, if not of *classic* value. Of course we should include for reading the work of the classic writers from the Greek period to the modern, wherever the subject-matter of the plays is suitable in theme and ideals and within the intellectual *and emotional* possibilities of the high-school student. A variety of types in drama is essential both in reading and in production. We should read tragedies, but not produce them perhaps, with high-school students. We would read and produce farces, comedies, fantasies, and poetic plays. We would read plays differing in style—that is, in structure, characters, dialogue, methods of exposition, etc., illustrative of various periods. I have not found it practical, for example, to include for reading any of the Roman comedies or any of the miracle plays. I have endeavored to exclude the modern play of sentimental type—that play of perhaps negative value, which requires, primarily, modern evening dress and a cast of characters made up largely of clever, joke-playing, "rah-rah" boys and college girls, for which our students entering upon a course in dramatics clamor so insistently. I have endeavored to exclude other objectionable types also—those, for example, which deal with exaggerated problems of living, such as the divorce. The suggested list of plays for reading has been made up with the intention merely of including good plays of such variety in type as to illustrate problems in criticism, taste, and

methods, from the point of view of production. "*Seeing good plays spoils bad plays for us!*"

I might mention, in passing, a good little book called *Choosing a Play* by Miss Gertrude Johnson, published this year. This book takes up matter that is invaluable, I believe, to the teacher whose task it is to select plays.

It is quite apparent, I think, from the brief outline which I have suggested of the aims, content, and conduct of the course, that I do not accept dramatics as an extra-curricular activity, but rather as a course worthy of academic credit; because, first, there is a fact content which is both literary and artistic, and which deals with the subject-matter of plays that present practical problems of living; because, secondly, there is a personal development content, which provides for the growth of mental analysis and imagination, emotional control, physical vigor and grace, and social assurance and poise; and because the subject can be taught scientifically. We are applying a psychological law when we capitalize the play instinct.

It has been gratifying for me to learn recently that one of our educators has so far appreciated the power of dramatics as a factor in the student's training as to suggest that the number of credits required for graduation be increased by two in order that every high-school student may be required to study one of the group of subjects which supplies just this personality training. This group of studies is to include physical education, music, and dramatics. It is to be termed the social-poise group.

Now I know that the course which I suggest includes rather more material than many high schools may choose, or be able, to give. I consider that some elementary treatment of all its phases, however, is both possible and practical in any high school where a course in dramatics is offered and where the aims suggested are approved. The outline suggests elasticity in amount of work to be assigned and a possible method of making assignment, when it proposes that no minimum requirement be made unless it becomes a necessity, and that each student be his own master, make his own assignment, and work!

When a teacher has established a high standard for the acceptance of work, and it has become generally known that nothing less than a pupil's best effort will meet that standard, it is safe to let the student assume the responsibility of making his own assignment. More than that—I believe it is wise. Oftentimes I have found that a student will assign himself a far greater task than I should dare require. The student, too, has the advantage of selecting material from one distinct field for one year and other fields the next year, or a lesser amount from each field both years. Usually he consults with the teacher to determine which method, in his particular case, is of greater value.

SUGGESTIONS FOR A TWO-YEAR COURSE IN DRAMATICS¹

- I. Prerequisite, one year in Fundamentals of Speech.
- II. Class shall have one day a week for discussion or lecture, the other four days for laboratory work on models, or rehearsals.
 - A. Registration for the class must be approved by instructor.
 - B. Students make their own assignments from suggested material.
- III. Aims:
 - A. To aid in development of personality.
 - B. To establish standards of criticism of the drama and theater.
 - C. To present in brief outline the history of the theater and its function during the great periods of its history.
 - D. To promote attendance at good plays.

(The course is not intended to aid in the "manufacture of actors and actresses.")
- IV. Content of the course.
 - A. Discussion and lecture topics (based on suggested reading):
 1. What is drama, plot, characterization, tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce?
 2. Brief history of drama and theater from classic to modern period.
 3. Stage sets and terms of the various periods.
 4. Contemporary drama: (a) actors; (b) producers; (c) plays; d) playwrights (including study of biographies, styles, methods, and current criticism).
 5. Little-theater movement in America.
 6. New world-movements in the theater.
 7. Position of the motion pictures today.

¹ This course is in actual operation though all the handicaps of no stage and generally poor facilities have to be met.

8. Voice requirements in characterization.
 9. Bodily postures, movements, actions, expressing thought and action.
 10. Unity of voice and action for individuals and groups.
 11. Standards of criticism of acting (attendance of best plays provided at class expense).
 12. Class study and presentation of scenes for illustrative purposes during class periods.
 13. Attendance at the theater as a cultural opportunity.
 14. What drama to *read*. *How* to read a drama.
 15. Ideals in presentation by class of plays for public performance.
 16. Organization of staff of production.
- B. Laboratory work (to substantiate discussion problems):
1. Construction of model stages and buildings in miniature for: Greek, Roman, Medieval (Pageant Wagon), Elizabethan, Italian, Renaissance, Belasco type, Portmanteau type, Reinhardt type.
 2. Designing of costumes for: Greek, Roman, Elizabethan, Puritan, Colonial, fantastic.
 3. Study of sculpture for action, of paintings for postures, groupings, and facial expressions, of folk-dancing for bodily rhythms.
 4. Study of lighting scenes, ventilation and heating of theaters.
 5. Study of make-up if advisable.
 6. Analysis of construction of chosen plays.
 7. Rehearsals of chosen plays for public presentation.
 8. Attempt at writing one-act plays.
- C. List of readings from which class shall choose.
- Members to make own *assignment* as to number and field.
- Weekly reports *advised*. Students wishing to read the same group of references for the week may make an appointment for a group discussion. *Keep notes*.
1. Little-theater movement:
 - a) Books: Beegle, *Community Drama and Pageantry*, chaps. i and ii; Eliot, *Little Theater Classics*, Preface; Mackaye, *Little Theater in the United States*; Phelps, *Twentieth Century Theater*, pp. 74-77.
 - b) Magazine articles: (*Reader's Guide*, 1914-1918. Space forbids the giving of titles, but the articles may be located by the authors.) Arvold, Collier, Eaton, Eliot, Gilman, Hackett, Haynes, Humphrey, MacGowan, Mackaye, Matthews, Moses, Walker, White.
 2. General references:
 - a) (Books and magazines about drama and theater): Belasco, *The Theater through Its Stage Door*; Cheney, *The Art Theater*; Craig, *The Art of the Theater* and *The Theater Advancing*;

Burton, *How to See a Play*; Hornblow, *History of the Theater in America*; Moderwell, *The Theater of Today*.

- b) References for Laboratory Work A 1 (locate through *Reader's Guide*, 1914): Mann, *The New Stagecraft*; Sylvester, *Shaksperian Stage and the Stage Today*; Lawrence, *New Light on the Elizabethan Theater*; La Farge, *Decorative Scenery*; Thorndike, *Shakspeare's Theater*.
3. Magazine articles dealing with the stage, the theater as social institution, drama as a literary form, and acting: Hopkins, "Hearing a Play with My Eyes"; Matthews, "Dramatic Unities"; Hamilton, "One-Act Play in America"; Matthews, "What a Good Play Really Is," Eaton, "What Is Entertainment?" Matthews, "Are Movies a Menace to the Drama?" Barker, "New Art of the Theater and Drama"; Eaton, "Is Acting a Bag of Tricks?" Wolcott, "Mrs. Fiske to the Actor in the Making"; Eaton, "Great Actors with Wonderful Personalities." The following unsigned articles: "Plays that Make People Think," "Stage Carpentry," "What Is a Good Play?"
4. List of plays for reading (choose): *Jeanne d'Arc*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *Happiness*, *The Littlest Rebel*, *The Rose o' Plymouth Town*, *The Girl with the Green Eyes*, *The Romancers*, *La Princess Lointaine*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, *La Phédre*, *The Marriage Proposal*, *The Man from Home*, *Seventeen*, *The Doll's House*, *The Return of Peter Grimm*, *Rosemary*, *The Blue Bird*, *Prunella*, *The Twig o' Thorn*, *A Thousand Years Ago*, *The Tents of the Arabs*, *The Rising of the Moon*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *The Rivals*, *Master Pierre Patelin*, *Electra*, *Antigone*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*.
(The list above is intended merely to include good plays of such variety as to illustrate problems in criticism, taste, and methods from the point of view of production.)
5. List of playwrights about whom class should know (look up references for yourself): Ibsen, Hauptman, Zangwill, Housman, Galsworthy, Pinero, Shaw, Barrie, Gregory, Dunsany, Yeats, Tchekoff, Fitch, Tarkington, Jones, Mackaye, Rostand, Molière, Racine, O'Neill.
6. List of actors and actresses about whom class should know (this list should be elastic): actors: Booth, Cibber, Skinner, Faversham, Irving, Jefferson, Mann, Arliss, Keane, Mansfield, Hampden, Drew, Maude, Forbes-Robertson, E. H. Sothorn, Warfield, John Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore; actresses: Siddons, Duse, Bernhardt, Terry, Adams, Anglin, Marlowe, Modjeska, Janauschek, Cowl, Fiske, Crossman, Barrymore.

7. Syndicates, producers, and artists of the theater: syndicates: Klaw, Shubert, Selwyn, Erlanger. Producers: Cohan, Hopkins, Williams, Ames, Belasco, Walker, Hume, Browne, Barker, Copeau, Antoine, Reinhardt, Stanislawski, Appia; artists: Urban, Jones, Craig, Geddes, Simonson, Johnson, Platt.

D. Notebooks and scrapbooks.

1. Keep all outlines.
2. Take notes on all class discussions and lectures.
3. Collect pictures and critical comments and paste in scrapbooks.
4. Take notes on all readings.
5. Make frequent reports about your progress to instructor (by appointment).

E. Bulletin-board announcement.

What can you contribute that is of value in any phase of the work of the course? Label your contribution and file it for posting.

F. General note on the amount of work required.

Because there are some lazy students in every class, minimum requirements of work in each field or phase of the course may have to be established. Be your own master. Make your own assignments. Work!